# VAST: A New Ball Game

Text: Peter Tepe | Section: On ‚Art and Science'

*Abstract: The VAST is considered on two levels: On level 1, it is a training of* aesthetic sensitivity *, which is addressed to those who share Goetz's guiding principle of balance and do not claim scientific standards for the test procedure. On level 2 it is examined how the VAST could be transformed into a test that meets scientific requirements; for this, specific suggestions are made.*

In round 1, various psychologists took part in the discussion on the *Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Test* (VAST) that Karl Otto Götz developed in the 1970s: Karin Götz responded to their statements in round 2. In round 3, a communication scientist and an art historian joined the circle and now, in round 4, I have entered the discussion as a philosopher and editor of w/k.

Currently, cooperations between artists and scientists are much in demand. For the sake of the future it is worth looking back at the past, when such cooperations were rare. Particularly interesting in this context is the collaboration between Karl Otto Götz – a painter of highest order who by this time had long since secured a prominent place in 20th century art history – and two renowned psychologists, Daniel E. Berlyne and Hans-Jürgen Eysenck.

**The published test**

Published in 1981 by the Concept Verlag in Düsseldorf, the booklet contains 42 pairs of images created by Götz. Some of these image pairs are graphic constructions reminiscent of those often found in tests. For other pairs, however, Götz adopts the *art informel* style of painting characteristic of his work, giving the VAST a certain aesthetic appeal. The booklet also includes two loose leaf pages: the *instructions* and a form to be filled out by anyone wishing to take the test. In the *instructions* Götz explains his concept:

> "Each pair of images consists of two similar motifs, of which one is always a better composition than the other. It is more harmonious, in other words *more balanced and regular in its linear design and in the arrangement of its formal elements.* If you look closely and long enough you will notice that by comparison the *less balanced* motif contains small graphic "disturbances". […] Now it is your task to determine which motif in each image pair is the *more balanced*. Sometimes it is the motif on the left, sometimes the one on the right. Please look very closely and take your time. When you have reached a decision please write on the blank form either an R (for right) or an L (for left) beside the number of the respective pair of images."

Götz is also keen to dispel a misunderstanding:

> "Please bear in mind that you are not being asked to judge which motif *you like better.* That is not the issue here. After all, sometimes the less balanced motif can be more *pleasing*, for instance, when it appears to be more interesting than the more harmonious image."

The VAST does not claim to be a *scientific* test that meets the criteria of contemporary test psychology [Testpsychologie]: for that it lacks any reference to specialist literature, for instance. Götz does not state which theoretical premises he works from and how these relate to competing approaches; nor does he discuss any methodological issues. So how can we describe his approach?

- He begins with his own experience in which one motif or image (in the broader, pre-artistic sense) might be more balanced than another. He lays out the test accordingly.
- As is evident in his above-quoted wording, he uses the terms “balanced” and “harmonious” largely or even entirely synonymously.
- Götz considers it a *cognitive achievement* to be able “to determine which motif is the *more balanced”.*
- He distinguishes this cognitive achievement from the pleasure judgement “I like A more than B”.
- Götz cites a “group of painters and graphic artists” who reviewed the test in advance. Firstly, they all seemed to agree which of the motifs were more balanced, and secondly, they agreed with Götz’s statement that the less balanced motif contained “small graphic ‘disturbances’”. No evidence for this is provided; however, any test claiming to have a scientific basis would probably be required to do so.
- Group 1 will show the aforementioned cognitive ability in all cases, group 2 in most cases, group 3 only in a few cases and group 4 (which may remain empty) in none at all. The information provided on age and gender can help further narrow down these groups and their varying *aesthetic sensitivities.*

Based on this description, I would classify the VAST in the following way: unusual in having been drafted by a (famous) artist, this test seeks to distinguish form that is based on the stated experiences and assumptions, which themselves are considered sufficiently plausible and are discussed no further. It was not Götz’s aim to create a test that fulfils the criteria of contemporary test psychology, so for the time being the VAST should not be measured by scientific standards. It addresses *those who share Götz’s experiences and assumptions.* Even today, such individuals can use the test to assess and sharpen their judgements on visual harmony – hence the test provides training for this kind of *aesthetic sensitivity.* And the goal of strengthening our visual-aesthetic powers in everyday life makes perfect sense.

The question of the VAST’s relevance for current psychology should be assessed separately. On a scientific level it may occur, for example, that one of the assumptions Götz relies on is mistaken or inferior to a competing assumption. Here we shall *discuss* the blind spots in Götz’s intuitive approach, which may be unproblematic in the arts, but can lead to misjudgements in the sciences.

**Two forms of cooperation with scientists**

Berlyne, Eysenck and other psychologists were not involved in the development of the VAST; according to Karin Götz's report, they simply received it with enthusiasm and *used it for their scientific psychological purposes.* Were someone to develop a test comparable to the VAST today, it would make sense *to collaborate with experts from the outset, in order to create a test that meets current scientific standards.* This does not rule out the possibility that, *in addition* to the more comprehensive publication intended for a specialist audience, a slimmed-down version could be published that, like Götz's booklet, is aimed at a broader audience to train certain aesthetic skills.

Initially, I wasn't planning to join the VAST discussion, simply because the central question "is this test still relevant for psychology in the present day, provided it deals with the aesthetic dimension?" primarily addresses psychologists, which I am not. However, over time I have come to believe that – in the context of my theory of aesthetic experience[1] as presented in 2019 – there may yet be better solutions to many of the problems that the VAST poses.

**"This picture is crooked"**

I begin with an example given in the *Discussion with Karin Götz about VAST* which also seems to be in the spirit of Karl Otto Götz:

> "On the walls of quite a few homes I have seen pictures hanging lopsidedly. When I pointed out that 'this picture's not straight' people would give me an astonished look and say, 'I hadn't noticed'."

Karin Götz speaks of the "ability to look more closely". Some people immediately notice that a picture, a mirror or a family photo is hanging crookedly on the wall. Others only notice when it is pointed out to them.

Within the framework of my theory, I classify this example first of all as a *simple sensory experience* with which everyone is familiar. A statement or a judgement such as "this picture is crooked" is an articulation of a simple sensory experience. It is an *elementary cognition judgement* that is either true or false. The claim's accuracy can easily be proven through measurements or the use of a spirit level, for example, to check whether the picture is indeed crooked.

In the context of everyday communication, however, there is usually more at play than simply noticing that the picture is crooked – and the statement also implies that the picture's crookedness is unattractive or frowned upon. This disapproval stems from an *aesthetic norm* which claims: mirrors, family photos, pictures etc. *should be hung straight.* Crookedness is to be *avoided.*

Let's compare the two experiences and their respective judgements: In the first case, A sees something that B does not, without demanding anything – it is simply an observation. In the second case, C sees something that B does not and implicitly associates a demand with this based on an aesthetic norm. A can be said to have a *sensibility* or a perceptual capacity that B lacks, but only C shows an *aesthetic sensitivity.*

**More balanced than …**

I now return to Götz's *instructions* and draw an important consequence from the above-mentioned differentiation. Test participants are given the task to "find the *more balanced* motif in each image". Even the observation that "motif A is more balanced than motif B" implicitly refers to — and this is my first critical thesis — a certain aesthetic norm (which we might call a norm of harmony or of balance).

Götz did not further analyse or discuss other interpretations of his central concept of greater or lesser balance. According to Karin Götz, he did not give greater thought to the test's theoretical foundations, including the choice of certain key concepts; rather, he followed his intuitive understanding of balance/harmony in the design of his test. Thus, if we follow the two distinct meanings of the statement "this picture is crooked", this means that for Götz, finding the more balanced image seems to follow the pattern of *simply noticing* that the picture is crooked – rather than *noticing it in relation to an aesthetic norm.* C's judgement that "this picture is crooked" is not merely a statement, as it is in A's case: it *implies* that "the picture should be hung straight"; it is linked to a non-verbalised suggestion to straighten the picture. In my opinion, it is not correct to treat the concept of visual harmony as a descriptive term; "is balanced" does not mean it "has such and such a quality", but rather that it "adheres to a certain aesthetic norm".

My thesis is this: finding the more balanced motif in each case is an activity *driven by a certain norm of balance or harmony* – it is not a simple observation. This intervention leads to a *qualification* of Götz's claims, which here, at least, does not pose a threat to the test itself: finding the more balanced motif in each case can now be *defined more precisely* as an activity that is based on a norm of harmony. To call something "balanced" presupposes an *aesthetic norm* that *calls for* a certain form. An aesthetic judgement of this kind is not true or false like a judgement made on the basis of a simple sensory experience – rather, it determines a better or worse approximation to an aesthetic norm.

If we accept my proposed qualification, we can determine the *structure of the test* more precisely*:* it is structured in such a way that one image or motif *corresponds better to this norm of harmony than to the other* – its "form is superior" *within the context of this aesthetic norm.* Therefore, the skill being tested here is one of applying the norm of harmony to a number of examples in order to find the image which better corresponds to this norm in each case.

**Recognition vs. personal preference**

In his *instructions,* Götz says, "Beware of making a judgement based on which motif you *like* better." "I like image A more than image B" can be treated (more or less) synonymously with "I find image A more beautiful than image B". The pleasure judgement articulated in such a preference is also termed a *taste judgement.* Götz manifestly assumes that different individuals often have *differing* tastes, which in relation to the VAST means that some people find image A more beautiful, whilst others find image B more beautiful. A test which aims to shed more light on the diverse experiences of beauty and their backgrounds is feasible: but the VAST takes a different approach.

As Karin Götz puts it, Götz is interested in an "aesthetic cognition judgement in which the harmony or disharmony of a visual structure is identified". My proposed qualification now makes it possible to

defend the opposition between *recognition* and *personal preference*:

- To recognise that picture A corresponds better to the norm of harmony than picture B is a purely cognitive achievement.
- This type of cognition measures concrete cases against a norm. This differs from elementary *empirical cognition,* which, for example, spontaneously identifies a seen object as a car in general and as a BMW in particular – i.e. it applies acquired *terms* to what is being sensorily perceived in a matter of seconds. By contrast, the VAST, if we follow my qualification, is about applying an *aesthetic norm* to what is being sensorily perceived.

Thus, by referring to the premise that the VAST tests the ability to apply a norm of harmony to pairs of images, we can defend the claim that the VAST asks "for an *aesthetic sensitivity judgement".* According to my proposed interpretation, the test results show that, to varying degrees, the test participants possess the ability to recognise which of the two images better corresponds to the norm of harmony.

**The VAST's future development**

If we wish to revise the VAST in such a way that it meets the standards required of scientific tests, there are two possibilities regarding the norm of balance. Firstly, the norm of harmony should be defined as clearly as possible so as to inform the test participants of the test's main purpose (namely the application of *precisely this* aesthetic norm). Secondly, at least one example should be used to demonstrate and *explain in detail* how to correctly apply the norm to a concrete image pair: this will *prove* that one image corresponds to the norm of harmony better than the other in one or another respect. Put in technical terms, this covers the issues of reliability and validity.

Taking this further development of the VAST into account, a test participant seen as fully meeting the requirements would be able to correctly grasp the norm of harmony and its exemplary application to an image pair and to treat all image pairs in the test accordingly. These additions prevent test participants from displaying a different understanding of balance and from applying the norm in a different way than is required. By explicating an assumption derived from Götz, we also point to a gap that ought to be filled on a scientific level. Explicating these assumptions, which were made tacitly in the process of developing the test, can yield consequences that were not considered by the test developer.

**What is the status of the norm of balance?**

I have tried to demonstrate that Götz, without making any mention of it in his *instructions,* tests the ability to apply a certain norm of balance to a variety of image pairs. The fact that he proceeds from a tacit assumption means he does not discuss the question of the *status* of this aesthetic norm. Essentially, there are two ways of thinking about the norm of balance:

*Option 1:* we are dealing with an aesthetic norm whose validity transcends time.

*Option 2:* we are dealing with an aesthetic norm that is accepted to a certain extent at a particular time and in a particular sociocultural context. If this applies, we should reckon with *several* norms of balance.

In this article, I cannot go into detail on whether option 1 or 2 is preferable[2]; instead, I will make do with putting forward a consideration that speaks for option 2. Had Götz attempted to define the norm of

balance he premised, he probably would have soon realised that this definition contains elements characteristic for a certain time and a certain sociocultural context, whereby this norm can no longer be considered timelessly valid as is the case for option 1. While we should distinguish the awareness of greater or lesser norm adequacy from making a judgement based on taste or preference, the norm of balance that is being referred to can be subject to change. I am merely indicating my view in this context: design programmes for objects of utility include norms of balance that are also norms of consistency– what may seem inconsistent within programme A can be consistent in programme B. The same applies on another level to art programmes.

This leads to a further differentiation: the idea that motif A corresponds better to a certain norm of balance than motif B might offer a certain insight, but this is not to say that one has thereby recognised the norm of balance that is *definitely correct*, but rather simply that one of many norms of balance has been *correctly applied*.

**Another status of the VAST**

In this light, the VAST gains a different status than that which Götz himself envisioned. He refers to a norm of balance that he himself accepts and that is common in various social settings – particularly in his artistic milieu – and tests the ability to apply it correctly to various image pairs. Accordingly, he *doesn't* test the ability to apply the *one timelessly valid* norm of balance correctly to a wide variety of image pairs. Thus, thanks to this new interpretation the VAST acquires *new meaning.*

On a scientific level, this opens up the possibility of developing further tests that use a comparable form to explore the application of norms of balance that stem from other contexts. Hence, there is not *one* aesthetic judgement, but rather several forms of aesthetic judgement that refer to different norms of balance – and to other aesthetic norms that are also subject to change.

If we accept that norms in general and aesthetic norms in particular are always *acquired* – often in the primary socialisation process – then people who, as Karin Götz puts it, "by nature have a good visual and aesthetic judgement" do not exist. However, there are people who can confidently apply certain acquired norms of balance within a matter of seconds.

*Conclusion:* I suggest that we view the VAST, which is without a doubt a pioneering work, on two levels:

- On level 1 it is a training for *aesthetic sensitivity* aimed at those who fully or largely share Götz's guiding idea of (greater or lesser) balance. The *instructions* serve as an introduction to the training programme, rather than as an introduction to a test procedure claiming to be scientific. Furthermore, such training can be structured in a more differentiated way than in the first VAST: for example, in addition to clarifying whether the norm of balance has been applied correctly, one could also assess *how long* it takes someone to apply it correctly.
- Level 2, on the other hand, examines how one could *transform* the VAST into a test that meets scientific standards. To this end, I have made the following suggestions, using the norm of balance as the guiding concept: the application of aesthetic norms should be distinguished from the application of descriptive terms. Recognising that motif A better corresponds to this norm than motif B presents a *cognitive achievement of a particular kind* which should be kept separate from

a judgement of preference or taste. However, we must reckon with *several* norms of balance, all of which are more or less widely accepted at a certain time in history and in a certain socio-historical context – most often in the form of a tacit, underlying consensus.

Picture above the text: Various test images from the VAST (1970-1981). Photo: Till Bödeker.

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[1] P. Tepe: *Beauty in everyday life. On the theory of aesthetic experience [Schönheit im Alltag. Zur Theorie der ästhetischen Erfahrung].* http://www.mythos-magazin.de/erklaerendehermeneutik/pt_schoenheit.pdf – w/k has published a summary: https://between-science-and-art.com/beauty-in-everyday-life-on-the-theory-of-aesthetic-experience/

Karl Otto and Karen Götz's approach in the theory of aesthetic experience is similar to my own, in the sense that we jointly believe that it is right and important first of all to deal with simple experiences related to *aesthetic sensitivity.* Then, and only on the basis of their analysis, can one address the more complex experiences related to artworks.

[2] This opens up a broad field for debate, for example with the position held by Gerhard Stemberger in *Round 1*.

Translated by Rebecca Grundmann.

**Tags**

1. Karin Götz
2. Karl Otto Götz
3. Peter Tepe
4. Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Test (VAST)